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Purity and Perversion: Renée Vivien's Ophelia Poetry

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Shakespeare's Ophelia is a complex figure of split and ambiguity. An array of negative aspects characterises her: Ophelia can be seen as a figure of lack—whether a lack of language, since “her speech is nothing” (Shakespeare 373), a “lack of character”, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge pointed out (362), or a lack of phallus, as Jacques Lacan affirmed (Showalter 77). When she is sane, she expresses herself in terms of doubt and fear (“My lord, I do not know / But truly I do fear it”, Shakespeare 234), self-denial (“I shall obey, my lord”, 201) and self-pity (“O woe is me / T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see!", 293). Once she goes mad, “she speaks things in doubt / that carry but half sense” (373). Those gaps in her lascivious language lead the reader to collect the fragments of her speech and to give them a meaning, to “botch the words up” (Shakespeare 373) so to speak. As Martha C. Ronk states, Ophelia's voice is ventriloquised since everything the reader knows about her life and death is always reported by other characters like Polonius, Laertes, Hamlet, Gertrude and even the gravediggers (Ronk 21).

Ophelia's demise is only one of several ambiguities associated with the character. It is controversial and surrounded by mystery because it is not performed onstage, but is reported by Gertrude, an “unreliable narrator” (Peterson 6) who did not witness Ophelia's death. The fact that the girl's drowning is conveyed to Gertrude by someone else may lead the audience to wonder whether Ophelia deliberately killed herself. In her description, Gertrude's words provide a spoken picture of Ophelia's death, an ekphrasis (Ronk 23), which gives the opportunity for imaginative appropriations, as argued by Elaine Showalter in her groundbreaking essay on Ophelia reception in nineteenth-century literature and visual culture. The opacities of Ophelia's fragmented speech, and of Gertrude's poetical account of her death, entitle artists and writers to reproduce the heroine's tragic end. But if the heroine in *Hamlet* was often censored in the performances and visual representations in the first half of the nineteenth century so that she became a purified and sanitised version of the character that fitted a “corseted Victorian construction of womanhood” (Rhodes 21), painters of the second half of the century such as John Everett Millais, Arthur Hughes and John William Waterhouse attempted to portray a more complex and controversial Ophelia. They isolated her from the context of her tragedy in *Hamlet* by confining her story to madness and death. Millais in particular turned Ophelia into an icon of feminine passivity that influenced following

painters and poets. As Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock have pointed out, Pre-Raphaelite depictions of dying women are negative constructions of femininity that reinforce patriarchal ideologies (Pollock 91–114). By crystallising Ophelia's death on canvas, Pre-Raphaelite painters were precursors of the Decadent and Symbolist aesthetic in France, and played a role in creating an Ophelia so tantalising and appealing to decadent artists (Cousseau 82). Their paintings, which began to reveal a darker and more ambiguous aspect of Ophelia's character, influenced French pictorial renditions, as well as poetical re-writings from 1870 onwards. Pauline Tarn (1877–1909), who published in French under the name Renée Vivien, was among those poets intrigued by Ophelia-like self-annihilating female icons.

In this article, I will examine the way the *fin de siècle* poetry of Vivien is captivated by the heroine's negative forces and internalises Ophelia's self-destructive behaviour as a way of reacting against a rigid patriarchal order through her madness and suicide. Dealing with Vivien's portrayal of ladies of the lakes, Tama Lea Engelking demonstrated the controversial way in which the poet tried to embrace the feminist cause without fully succeeding in doing so. My focus here, instead, is on the way Ophelia's ambiguities find correspondence in Vivien's paradoxical approach to the dying heroine and to the idea of a death wish. By analysing poetical renditions of Ophelia, I will focus on how Vivien transforms the character from a pure and unselfconscious heroine to an icon of perversion, which amplifies the ambiguities connected to the decadent *femme fatale* and embodies her enchanting feminine power (see Auerbach 8).

What seems to attract Vivien is Ophelia's duplicity and her self-destructive madness by which she is "divided from herself and her fair judgement" (Shakespeare 380). A closer analysis of Vivien's biography reveals the way that the poet experienced the condition of being "a divided self" and the way she internalised Ophelia's ambiguity as a way to give to vent a struggle against patriarchal visions of women. Born in London in 1877 to an American mother and a British father, Pauline Mary Tarn grew up in Paris, where she was in touch with the decadent sensibility of French poets such as Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Baudelaire. Because of her father's premature death, Vivien's family moved back to England, a place that the poet considered a foreign country (Goujon 57) and where she felt herself to be in exile. Vivien finally escaped from this traumatic experience when she turned twenty-one and was able to permanently move to France, a place where she could directly experience the influences of the symbolist poets, enjoy a bohemian lifestyle, and where her homosexuality was more tolerated than in England. According to her biographer Jean-Paul Goujon, Pauline's decision to write in French could be considered a refusal of the mother that is said to have neglected her in childhood (41). The issue of language in Vivien's literary production cannot be divided from the concept of "patrie" or "matrice", as emphasised by Marie Ange Bartholomot Bessou (2004, 34). However, it seems that Vivien's rejection of her English mother tongue represents a necessity to free herself from the restrictive Victorian morality of nineteenth-century English culture that was embodied by her father (Engelking 365). First publishing under the French pseudonym of R.

Vivien (the R hiding any reference to her gender), the poet wanted to underline her double birth: Re-née, in fact, means re-born in French, and the name Vivien also alludes to a new birth. Nevertheless, she never completely cut herself off from her English cultural heritage: her interest in authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Keats, Swinburne and Rossetti, among the others, shows her lifelong connection with the English literary canon. Her bilingualism and biculturalism are recurrently present in her work by means of intertextual quotation, translation and re-writing. Shakespeare's plots often constitute an intertext for Vivien's works: King Lear makes his appearance in a poem called "Sous le Rafale", whereas Desdemona, Macbeth and Hamlet appear in a novel called *L'être double* [*The Double Being*]. Vivien also engaged in rewriting in her "Sonnetts imitant Shakespeare" ["Sonnetts imitating Shakespeare"]. The Shakespearean heroine who seemingly enticed Vivien the most, however, is Ophelia. In re-writing her story, Vivien may have relied not only on *Hamlet*, but also on Pre-Raphaelite art portraying her watery death.

Vivien's first poetical attempt to re-write Ophelia's death, "La chanson d'Ophélie" (1986, 434–35), composed in 1894 when she was a teenager, shows the influence of the Shakespearean intertext, but is also indebted to a Pre-Raphaelite decadent atmosphere. Like Pre-Raphaelite painters before her, Vivien declines the conventional and unquestioning imitation of the romantic stereotype of a sanitised woman who purifies herself in reviving waters (see James Vest's investigation into the myth of Ophelia in French romantic literature). Vivien's Ophelia, by contrast, is steeped in decadent sensibility. Vivien also takes inspiration from the 1870 Rimbaud poem "Ophélie", which largely accounts for the spread of the Ophelia myth in the French *fin de siècle* literary context. In Vivien's poem, as in Gertrude's speech, Ophelia gathers some flowers and is not conscious of the danger of death: in the poem's first line, "Elle chante, inconsciente" [she sings, unconscious]. The flowers' freshness is the objective correlative of Ophelia's youth: she looks like a nymph dancing in the ether, like a ray of light in spring. But from the second half of the stanza onwards, the decay of natural elements anticipates Ophelia's imminent drowning and the verb "rayonne" [to shine] gives way to the noun "couronne" [garland], which refers to the Ophelia's funeral flowers. Like Laertes in *Hamlet*, Vivien suggests that water is Ophelia's element. However, water has no vivifying properties but merely represents Ophelia's grave. The rhyming couplet "eau" [water] and "tombeau" [grave] at the end of the first stanza makes the link between the dying waters of the river and the girl's death. The "petit enfant" [little child] who climbs up the branch of the willow tree echoes the naivety that Polonius reproaches his daughter for ("Think yourself a baby". Shakespeare 198). The use of this comparison reveals the importance Vivien gives to her literary appropriation of Shakespeare: her poetry relies on literary forebears like a child sheltering on its father's shoulders. However, by first adopting an imitative approach to Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death, and then challenging Shakespeare's authorship, Vivien seems to claim her own authorial voice and emphasises a controversial relationship with the motherland she escaped and with the English literary canon.

As a consequence, in the second part of the poem the poet releases herself from the Shakespearean hypotext in order to give scope for a deeper identification with the heroine's tragic end. The source of her inspiration seems to be Rimbaud rather than the Bard. The verb "suspendre" [to suspend], which divides the poem into two parts, is revealing because it creates an atemporal dimension: like Rimbaud's Ophelia, who "for more than a thousand years / Has passed, a white phantom, down the long black river" (Rimbaud 22), Vivien's maid seems to be caught in an indefinite time. In addition, the verbs in the final section of the poem such as the present tense and the gerundive forms ("en tressant", "en chantant", "flottant" ["by making garlands", "by singing", "floating"]) create a timeless atmosphere that crystallises the moment of dying. By eternalising the heroine's death, Vivien seems to reproduce in poetry the same immobility that Millais had created in his painting, so underpinning patriarchal ideologies that critics like Cherry and Pollock have found in Pre-Raphaelite representations of dying women. This is the reason why, as Engelking states, the representation of Ophelia in this poem is "rather conventional and does not point to the subversive turn some of [Vivien's] more mature prose and Sapphic poetry would take" (373). However, it seems to me that Vivien tries to revise Pre-Raphaelite misogynistic representations of the heroine by opposing a gynocentric view in the final part of her "Chanson d'Ophélie". In his book *Idols of Perversity*, Bram Dijkstra criticised images of women from 1880 to 1990 as "a veritable iconography of misogyny" (viii). What seems to be at odds in Vivien's poetry with the conventional Pre-Raphaelite image of Ophelia's drowning is that the dying heroine is not the privileged focus of male scrutiny anymore: nobody but the willow tree can see her dying or listen to her song turning into a death-rattle. Differently to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which only Gertrude reports Ophelia's death, and differently to Rimbaud's poem too, where only the visionary poet has the privilege of seeing the maid's tragic end, Vivien highlights a total absence of human witness. It seems as if only a lyric voice of female suffering can convey Ophelia's pain. It is that very same aestheticised death which Vivien's lyric I wishes for herself, and in the closing stanza she reveals her lyrical self-complaint and expresses a desire to die as Ophelia does. The anaphoric use of the passive form ("Entraînée par le fleuve") and the three qualifying adjectives ("inconnu, mystérieux, et suprême") that slow down the rhythm emphasise both the heroine's passive surrender and the poet's unresponsive attitude:

Puissè-je ainsi mourir, les mains pleines de fleures
En chantant jusqu'au bout, sans larmes, sans terreur
Chantant jusqu'à ma mort, entraînée quand même
Par le fleuve inconnu, mystérieux et suprême
Par le fleuve funèbre où va l'homme banni
Par le fleuve profond qui mène à l'infini.

[I wish I could die, flowers in my hands
While I sing until the end, without tears, without terror
By singing until my death comes, dragged alike
by the unknown, mysterious and supreme river

by the gloomy river where the banished man goes
by the yawning river leading to the Infinite.]¹

Here Ophelia is not a dying woman to be observed from afar. She is not a fictional character anymore. She seems instead a living, haunting presence, desiring her own beautified death to be conveyed by a female poet who sympathises with her. The death wish in the poem seems to be dependent on Vivien's lifelong sense of guilt and imprisonment. As the "Chanson d'Ophélie" hints at its end, the young poet considered herself a sinner at the time she wrote this poem (on the poem's biographical context see Engelking 372). Her problematical identification with the life-denying Ophelia implies that the Shakespearean heroine, too, being dragged into the "Infinite" by an Acheron-like river, is a sinner. This idea of Ophelia as a wicked girl does not belong exclusively to Vivien: in *Hamlet*, misogynistic speech in the nunnery scene has the prince define Ophelia as "a breeder of sinners", because he considers her as lascivious as his mother. The poem, however, epitomises Vivien's vacillating representation of a pure and sinful Ophelia. The "dangerous conjectures" she "may strew in ill-breeding minds" assume the features of "perversity".

Vivien's perverse Ophelia figure first appears in a prose poem included in the collection *Du vert au violet* which is called "À la perverse Ophélie", then in a homonymic poem collected in *La Venus des Aveugles*, and finally in the autobiographical novel *Une femme m'apparut*. Even if the perverse Ophelia shares with the poem "La chanson d'Ophélie" the same *fin de siècle* imaginary of decay and morbidity, a changed perspective on the heroine of *Hamlet* emerges. From a suicidal girl she has been turned into a perverse drowned woman:

Je t'ai jadis emportée vers l'eau qui t'aime, vers l'eau qui te ressemble, et je
t'ai noyée. . .

Et l'eau est devenue un marais stagnant.
Ainsi qu'une perverse Ophélie, tu flottes à la surface de l'étang livide

(Vivien 1903, 84)

[I have formerly dragged you to the water that loves you, to the water that
looks like you, and I drowned you. . .

And the water turned into a stagnant marsh.

Like a perverse Ophelia, you float on the surface of a livid pond]

Here ambivalent feelings come with the antithetical association between love and death: the lyric voice confesses that she has metaphorically killed her female lover with her loving though cruel hands ("mains amoureuses", "mains criminelles"). Ophelia's beautified death that Vivien had outlined in "La chanson d'Ophélie" assumes here the gothic undertones of a murder, and even the natural elements surrounding Ophelia's corpse are as livid as a putrid marsh.

¹ All quotations from Renée Vivien's poems and prose, and from criticism on her work for which there is no published English translation, are given in French, followed by my English translation.

In the following poem “À la perverse Ophélie”, published in 1904, the female speaker dialogues with a dead Ophelia who haunts her like a ghost and she believes that she herself is the one who drowned her (Engelking 374). This poem stresses the female alternation between “me” and “you”, but the vocative “you” seems to be rather an “I” split in two. I suggest reading this poem as a sort of schizophrenic dialogue between Vivien and her own Ophelia-like perverse double, revealing self-destructive desires. The rhetorical questions that characterise the second part of the poem express uncertainty, doubt, and self-reproach:

T'ai-je noyée hier dans le marais stagnant
Où flotte ton regard, ô perverse Ophélie?... Ai-je pleuré ta mort dans l'énigme
du jour
Qui disparaît, chargé d'espoirs et d'infortunes?...
(Vivien 1904, 38)

[Did I kill you yesterday in the stagnant marsh
where your eyes float, o perverse Ophelia?... Did I mourn over your death
in the mystery
of the vanishing day full of hopes and misfortunes?...]

The voice in the poem perceives herself as something to discharge, as someone she wants to drown. The drowning, though, represents neither a rite of purification nor an act of redemption, for the surface of the water on which Ophelia's corpse floats is dead and silent (“l'eau morte”; “l'eau calme”). There is no rescue for her, nor for those “Femmes de Désire” [women of desire] who are imprisoned “dans la perversité de leur inquiétude” [in the perversity of their anxiety] in the poem “After Glow” (Vivien 2009, 128).

In Vivien's era, a woman who loses her virginity and sacrifices her body to a man is a fallen creature who deserves to be submitted to the patriarchal order. The poet stigmatises the law and the conventions confining women to a subaltern condition (see Bartholomot Bessou 2009, 145) in a poem titled “L'éternelle esclave”, collected in *Du Vert au Violet*, which immediately follows the aforementioned prose poem “À la perverse Ophélie”. Here the man is depicted as “tantôt bourreau et tantôt parasite” [both a parasite and a persecutor] (1903, 89) and the woman is physically and socially subjugated to him. She is portrayed as a slave in golden and silver chains, dominated by the man and forced to obey his orders and to trust his insincere talk of love. In those “hypocrites paroles d'amour qui se mêlaient aux ordres du maître” [hypocritical words of love, blended to the master's orders] can be found a connection to Hamlet's words towards Ophelia in the nunnery scene: first denying his words of affection to her, then repeatedly ordering her to go to a nunnery, Hamlet seems to represent “l'homme bourreau” or the “parasite” who deceives his beloved and embodies the patriarchal system. Instead of being a complaint about the woman's condition, these lines emphasise a hesitantly feminist discourse. According to the poet, the woman passively accepts her subaltern condition because of her ignorant approval of misogynist customs.

Vivien's vacillating feminist discourse is resumed in a sonnet where the poet starts to consider her female lover a "double aimant" [a loving double]² who is "grave comme Hamlet, pale comme Ophélie" [grave like Hamlet, pale like Ophelia]. As Jean Manning has pointed out, the myth of the androgynous that intrigued Vivien so much is not only rooted in the fusion between the sexes, but in the idea of perfection coming from both of them (152). Instead of considering the fusion between genders in positive terms, Vivien's poem conveys someone feeling flustered by the double being:

Mon cœur déconcerté se trouble quand je vois
Ton front pensif de prince et tes yeux blues de vierge
Tantôt l'Un, tantôt l'Autre, et les Deux à la fois.
[My disconcerted heart is flustered when I see
Your pensive prince's brow and your blue virgin eyes,
Sometimes One, sometimes the Other, and Both at once.]

Ophelia's lack of unity becomes here a troubling issue. The poet's own divided self, her French and English cultural heritage, imitation and rewriting, male and female, purity and perversion, feminist and anti-feminist discourse, can recompose itself only in poetry and in an Ophelia-like aestheticised death. As Teresa Campi remarks, poetry was the only possible place where Renée Vivien and Pauline Tarn could finally meet (96–97).

The identification between Vivien's Ophelia and the Shakespearean Ophelia is not confined to the poet's lyric work. Ophelia's dead body seems to be the object of Vivien's literary quest in a wider sense. As I have tried to demonstrate, she has a prominent place in Vivien's poetry as both a poetical subject to appropriate and as an artistic image to be inspired by: Vivien's attraction to madness and suicide can be traced back to the character of Ophelia, even though, as far as I am concerned, she never directly makes this explicit in her autobiographical works. In her fictional autobiography *Une femme m'apparut* [*A woman appeared to me*], Vivien wonders where her peculiar desire for madness and suicide comes from:

D'où me vient cette passion singulière pour la folie et pour le suicide, alors
que je ne possède ni assez d'imagination pour l'une, ni assez de courage pour
l'autre ? Je ne sais (180)
[Where does my singular passion for madness and suicide come from, since
I don't have either enough imagination for the first, nor enough courage for
the second? I don't know]

By considering herself a self-destroying lunatic Ophelia, the poet wanted her own death to be turned into an artwork. To her, pretending to be like Ophelia and interiorising her pain implied beautifying her own death through art. Vivien's own madness and death represented her response to a rigid patriarchal system, a way to voice her pain, and to vent her rebellion against masculine literary traditions. As

²The English translation of this poem is from Jay (101).

Engelking states, her work “records the woman poet’s struggle to negotiate with a masculine literary tradition that reveals both the restrictions suffered by creative women, and the disruptive possibilities of feminist poetic revisions” (375).

Nevertheless, what she was not able to fully accomplish in her poetry, she could fulfil through an aestheticised death. This may be the reason why Vivien decided to wear an Ophelia-like white gown for her own funeral and arranged for her grave to be covered with violets, those same flowers she had loved during her life such that she was known as “la muse aux violettes”. Her desire, like Laertes’s wish for his sister, is “from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring” (Shakespeare 427). The death that she had wished for so long, after suffering from anorexia, alcohol and laudanum addiction, and at least one suicide attempt, represented the only moment in which the artist could join death’s double, life (see Campi 96). To Vivien, the pursuit of an idealised death was a sort of an apotropaic ritual intended to prevent the body, a physical and textual body, from decaying (see Bronfen 164–65). Only an externally and eternally beautified death could restore both Vivien’s body and soul. Fascinated by a double being like Ophelia, whose depicted death gave a neverending artistic existence, Vivien relies on her own demise to celebrate the immortality of her poetical re-writing of Ophelia, an immortality to be acquired through art.

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